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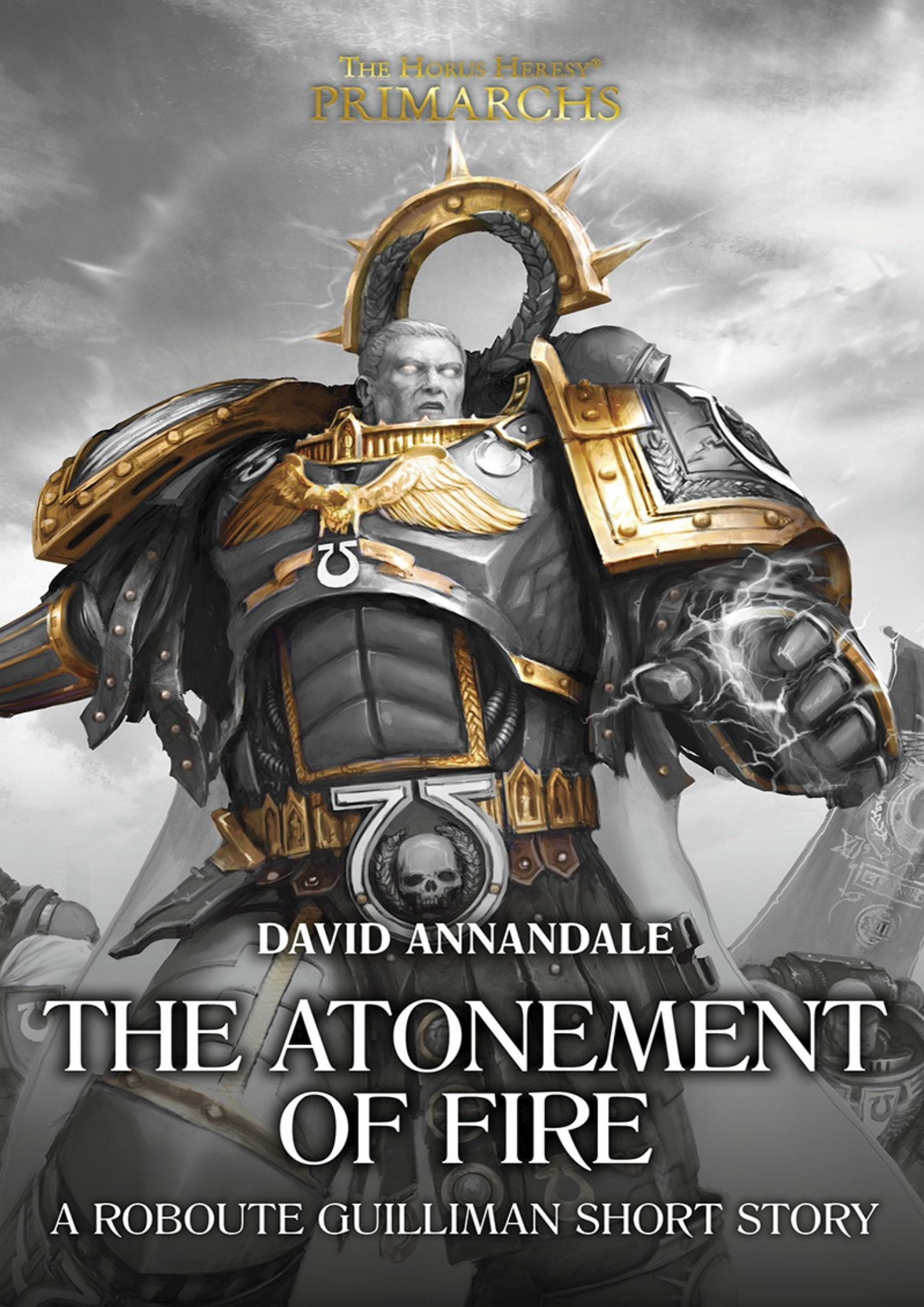
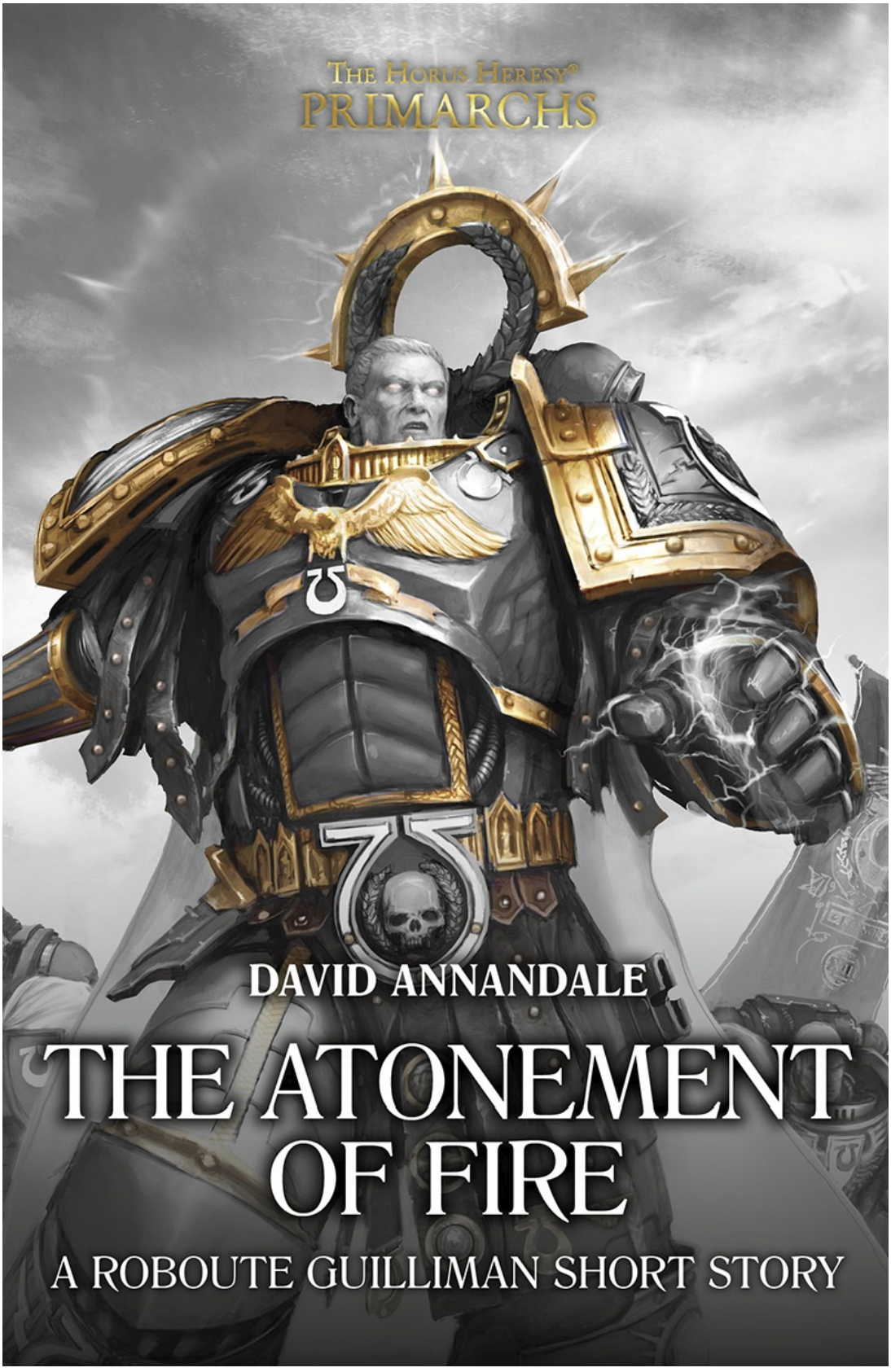


DAVID ANNANDALE

THE ATONEMENT OF FIRE

A ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN SHORT STORY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CONTENTS

Cover
The Atonement of Fire – David Annandale
About the Author
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THE ATONEMENT OF FIRE

David Annandale

Imprimis: the compliance of Diavanos was entirely peaceful. It was, and is, a reminder that our Crusade is first and foremost not about conquest, but about bringing illumination to the galaxy. The people of Diavanos greeted the promulgation of the Imperial Truth with rejoicing. (Addendum: The enthusiasm did, in some quarters, approach religious fervour, up to and including claims of fulfilled prophecy. Noting and countering this tendency immediately proved effective, and it is to be regretted that early detection was not possible on Khur.)

Secundo: despite their long isolation during the Age of Strife, the people of Diavanos managed to maintain a rich culture. Impressions formed by walking the streets of the capital, Ecstasia, are dominated by the pronounced elegance of the stained-glass towers, whose survival to the present day is remarkable.

Tertio: Diavanos' contributions to the Crusade post-compliance have been substantial. Over and above its considerable mining industries, it has provided a disproportionately high number of remembrancers.

Conclusion: Diavanos presents a number of characteristics, apparent during its initial compliance and since, that make it a model of the Imperium's achievement.

– *Guilliman,* Notes on Diavanos:
Compliance and Aftermath, *clvi*

I

The Matter of Sin

The Lord of Ultramar paced the circumference of the Reclusiam on the battleship *Ultimus Mundi*. Lumen globes in sconces kept the chamber in a

perpetual deep twilight, conducive to meditation. Fluted columns rose every thirty-six degrees around the wide circle of the space. The designs of their crowns varied very slightly from one to the next, inviting the eye and concentrating the mind. In the centre of the Reclusiam, Chaplain Volusius remained perfectly still. When he spoke, his voice was low, the murmur of a deep river, prompting Guilliman's flow of reflection.

'Is the sin beyond forgiveness?' Volusius asked.

'The Imperium Secundus was usurpation,' said Guilliman. 'Intentions do not matter when the crime is this great. We do not forgive treachery.'

'This was not treachery. Treachery implies intent.'

'That hardly lessens the gravity of usurpation.'

'It alters the nature of the sin,' said Volusius. 'And you did not answer the question of forgiveness directly.'

'I did not,' Guilliman admitted.

'You seek forgiveness?'

'I desire it.'

'The Emperor's or your own?' the Chaplain probed.

'It isn't a question of receiving forgiveness,' said Guilliman. 'It is a question of earning it.'

'Earned through self-denial? By not returning to Terra, you turn away from the possibility of receiving the Emperor's forgiveness directly.'

Guilliman shook his head, uneasy. 'Our strategy is dictated by the practical. Sanguinius must confront Horus. That is his destiny.' Acknowledging the reality of fate was still difficult, but he had seen too much now to do otherwise. 'The Blood Angels must reach Terra. The break in the Ruinstorm is a narrow one. The immaterium is still too violent for long jumps, and the traitors will seek to ambush the Ninth Legion. Our fleet is the largest and most able to engage the forces that will try to stop Sanguinius.' Of this much he was sure.

'There is no other reason for this choice?' said Volusius.

Guilliman did not answer.

'How is forgiveness earned?' the Chaplain asked again.

'By preserving my father's dream,' said Guilliman.

II

The Matter of Atonement

Madness clutched at the fleet. It found no grip, repelled by Geller fields. It slid against the hull of every battleship, cruiser and escort, screaming

frustration and trailing flames of murdered colours. Scores of ships cut through the empyrean with a directness of purpose long denied them, rushing towards a threefold mission. They would strike in support of another fleet. They would strike in the name of salvation. And they would strike in the name of vengeance.

In the strategium of the battleship *Ultimus Mundi*, the Lord of Ultramar contemplated the fragility of dreams, and the nightmare of force needed to preserve them.

'We'll be fortunate if anything of Diavanos remains,' Titus Prayto said. It seemed that he, too, had been thinking about fragility. The Librarian shook his head. 'It is not a world that could withstand the attention of the Twelfth Legion for long.'

'The cry for help the astropathic choirs intercepted is a recent one,' Drakus Gorod pointed out. 'If Diavanos was able to get a message out, then the World Eaters have only just arrived.'

Guilliman thought for a moment, then he tapped the controls of the tacticarium table. The hololithic display of the threatened world became a map of the subsector with Diavanos' system at the core. 'We may be the indirect cause of the attack,' he said, making a further adjustment. The trajectory of the Blood Angels fleet towards Terra appeared, along with the known positions of traitor blockades.

'Our first report of the World Eaters fleet placed it to the galactic east of Diavanos,' Guilliman said.

'They know the Blood Angels are coming,' Gorod said. 'Diavanos is an excellent staging ground for an ambush on the route Sanguinius must take.'

'That is a new redeployment then,' said Prayto. 'There may be hope for Diavanos yet.'

'Destruction and hope,' Guilliman told his sons. 'We are the bearers of both.'

It was hope that obsessed him. Prayto must have seen it in his face, or perhaps the same thoughts haunted the Librarian. 'It would mean much to preserve this world,' he said.

'It is what the Imperium can be,' Guilliman said. *It is part of my atonement*, he thought. He would not see it fall to Angron's monsters.

And if he did save it, if in this present moment he preserved the world's past and its future, and did so in service to opening the way for Sanguinius and the salvation of Terra, then that would be another step towards his personal atonement. He did not think he would ever truly expiate the sin of the Imperium Secundus. But saving Diavanos was important in practical and symbolic terms.

He returned to the practical now. He studied the trajectories of the

Ultramarines and Blood Angels fleets. Timing their movements was approximate. It would have been even if the warp were not in turmoil. But the distance to Diavanos was short in galactic terms. ‘The World Eaters will need to be moving out of the system if they hope to intercept Sanguinius,’ he said. ‘Their emergence will have to coincide closely with our translation at the Mandeville point. We will act accordingly. I want the fleet in attack formation, weapons ready. We shall be the arrival of lightning.’

The ships of the XIII Legion stormed out of the warp, and they were both gladius and shield. Their formation was impenetrable, their numbers so great that there could be no hope of going around them. And they struck with a violence that cut the night of the void open with terrible light. They emerged with torpedoes in launch tubes, cannons loaded and lances primed, already looking for the enemy.

The enemy were where Guilliman had foreseen they would be. The World Eaters had left Diavanos behind, and were just beyond the orbit of the outermost planet of the system. Their ships were close together. The Ultramarines came at them from the port flank. Guilliman’s fleet was more than twice the size of that the World Eaters had mustered, its front wider than the length of the XII Legion’s formation.

Finally, Guilliman thought. *Finally, we strike you traitors as you deserve to be struck.*

The civilisation-killing barrage from the Ultramarines hit along the entire flank of the World Eaters fleet. A coronal chain of fire blasted across the traitor ships. The darkness blazed with explosions and the flare of overwhelmed void shields.

‘A strong thrust,’ Guilliman said as the blinding glare filled the oculus. ‘We have cut them deeply.’

Battleships and grand cruisers survived the initial moments of the barrage, but the smaller vessels were less fortunate. Catastrophe roared through their hulls. The cruisers *Galerus* and *Clavam* died immediately. The *Galerus*’ engines ruptured. Multiple torpedo and cannon hits from the *Gauntlet of Power* vaporised the forward third of the *Clavam*, and its ordnance exploded at once. Twin suns shone in the centre of the fleet. The titanic plasma explosions washed over the other ships, compounding damage, taking out the frigate *Bellicose* and crippling the battle-barge *Iaculum*.

The bridge of the *Ultimus Mundi* erupted with shouts of ‘*For Calth! For the Five Hundred Worlds!*’

‘It is good to see them burn,’ said Gorod.

‘Burning is too merciful for them,’ Guilliman said. ‘But you’re right. These

are pyres that have been long in coming.’

The World Eaters responded to the attack eagerly. Their ships turned slowly. Their grace and majesty was due to their immense mass, and belied the bloodthirsty madness of the monsters who commanded them. Their weapons were fast, though, and the fury of the XII Legion hit back against the righteousness of the XIII. Angron’s sons tore across battlefields like maddened beasts, yet they still possessed the discipline of warriors. They knew how to respond to the great fleet that had come for them. As the burning vessels turned, weathering the unending barrage, they did not break formation. The devastating shock waves unleashed from the slain ships were a huge push outwards. The fleet could easily have lost all coherence, wounded beasts lashing out from the collapsing centre. Instead, the World Eaters tightened their formation, all the while maintaining ferocious retaliatory fire from their broadsides. Bleeding flame, rents in their hulls spilling freezing gases and bodies into the void, the monuments to savagery drew closer and closer together, altering their trajectories until they were bow to bow with the Ultramarines, and the fleet had become a battering ram.

The system’s sun was a distant, tiny spark of blue-tinted white, so far away it stood out from other stars only by the intensity of its light. Its cold eye faded beside the fury that had erupted in the far reaches of its system. The Legion fleets clashed with the force of a nova, a vast, roaring aurora of crimson and violet surrounding the vessels. The violence of the battle seemed as if it should tear open a new rift in the materium. With their fire heavily concentrated, the World Eaters hammered the Ultramarines’ wall. They destroyed the *Rectitude* and the *Integritas* and the *Objective Truth*. The grand cruiser *Infestus* accounted for two of the killing blows before it perished in its turn. The nova grew brighter still, and the World Eaters’ battering ram began to lose coherence. It failed to break through the line of the XIII Legion. More ships died or fell back, engines damaged and unable to keep up the charge.

On the bridge of the *Ultimus Mundi*, Guilliman tracked the advance of the battle, consumed by the demands of the immediate moments across the fleet. His sons acquitted themselves as he knew they would. Every piece of the primarch’s colossal war machine acted in consonance with the purpose of the whole, and the purpose was devastation. Guilliman ordered adjustments to individual trajectories that cumulatively became the movement of the advancing wall. The fleet closed with the World Eaters as a unified, unyielding whole, and Guilliman viewed the enemy as a single, great beast, assessing moment to moment which blow was needed to bring it down.

As individual vessels fell away from the whole, he shifted his focus away from them, leaving them to the elements of the fleet that were tasked to finish

them off. When the battleship *Gladiator* veered away from the formation, its port flank blackened and pulsing with flame and flickering power levels, he gave a slight nod, satisfied to see the fleet's leader taken from the fight. He did not let himself be lulled by the hope that this represented a decapitation of the World Eaters. They would fight to their last, brutal drop of blood. Because he was not distracted by the *Gladiator*, he saw that the *Bringer of Ruin* took over command of the formation from the centre, and he directed the *Ultimus Mundi* and the *Triumph of Espandor* to bring a new concentration of fire against it.

Because the *Gladiator* had left the front line of the void battle, Guilliman did not follow where it went as the distance between it and the XIII Legion grew. Because he did not follow it, he was able to mark the moment that the current of the battle became definitive. The World Eaters still fought, and drew blood, but there was nothing they could do. The Ultramarines' wall curved around them and tightened, closing off all avenues of escape. The beginning of the end of the struggle had come.

We have cleared your path for you, Sanguinius, Guilliman thought. *We will do so again. You will reach Terra*.

Then Iasus, Chapter Master of the 22nd aboard the strike cruiser *Cavascor* was on the vox. '*The* Gladiator *is making for Diavanos*,' Iasus said. '*We are in pursuit.*'

Guilliman saw what the commander of the World Eaters was doing. The traitor also knew that the battle was lost. And he saw how to strike one last, festering blow. The symbolism of Diavanos was as clear to the World Eaters as it was to the Ultramarines.

'The World Eaters cannot let the promise of Diavonos survive,' said Prayto, echoing Guilliman's thoughts.

'Can you close with the enemy in time?' Guilliman asked Iasus.

'*We have engaged it, but its defences are holding. Lord primarch, we will destroy it, but not before it burns Diavanos. I have ordered a Caestus boarding attack.*'

'Prepare two assault rams,' Guilliman ordered. To Gorod he said, 'Gather an Invictus squad. We are teleporting to the *Cavascor*. Diavanos has not seen its final dawn. I swear this in my father's name.'

Gorod blinked. 'You will lead the attack?'

'I will preserve Diavanos with my bare hands if I have to.' *And I will exact a reprisal of flesh for the Five Hundred Worlds*, he thought. He was glad it was the *Cavascor* that was pursuing the *Gladiator*. Iasus commanded the Destroyers. The brutality of their way of war would be fitting justice for the World Eaters.

‘*Heavy defensive fire!*’ the Caestus pilot warned.

‘Can you reach our targets?’ Guilliman voxed. He stood in the troop compartment of the lead assault ram, the combi-bolter *Arbitrator* mag-locked to his side, the power gauntlet *Hand of Dominion* crackling with somnolent power on his left fist.

‘*Their defence of the upper superstructure is too strong, lord primarch.*’ A glancing strike strained the inertial recoil compensation systems. A bulkhead split and a conduit exploded, filling the compartment with flame and smoke. ‘*We are making for a gap where the cannons have been destroyed lower down.*’

‘*The journey to the bridge will be much longer*,’ voxed Captain Hierax, commanding a squad of Destroyers aboard the second ram. ‘*Do we alter the practical?*’

‘We move faster, captain,’ Guilliman replied. ‘Before the *Gladiator* is in range of Diavanos, we *will* take the bridge and decapitate the ship.’ He gave his command the force of law.

‘*So it shall be, lord primarch*.’ Beneath Hierax’s disciplined tone was the promise of a massacre to be unleashed on the World Eaters.

The hull rang and trembled. Smoke poured into the troop hold as the damage mounted. ‘Angron’s sons are trying very hard to stave off their execution,’ Gorod said.

‘If they do not welcome the punishment then they should never have followed Horus,’ said Guilliman. At the back of his mind, he had been calculating the seconds to impact, adjusting for the change in course, extrapolating the distance to the new target. Now he called ‘Brace for impact!’ at the same moment as the pilot.

The Caestus ram slammed into the base of the *Gladiator’*s superstructure and its magna-meltas turned the ship’s armour to slag. The hull jerked as if struck by a hammer, the recoil compensators dampening the shock to a mere tremor.

‘Now let the traitors know fear!’ Guilliman shouted as Firefury missiles devastated the space before the ram. The loading ramps dropped, and Guilliman led the charge. Explosions still thundered, and at first Guilliman thought the missiles had triggered secondary blasts by striking an ordnance storage facility. But the explosions kept going, and they were coming from above. The muffled crashes were huge. The entire hull rang with them.

‘Have we caused that?’ Gorod asked.

They had arrived in a crew dormitorium. The carbonised bodies of XII Legion serfs lay in a cluster near the doorway to the primary exit. Gorod was not looking at the bodies. He was staring upwards as the brass-engraved

ceiling trembled again.

‘This is the doing of the enemy,’ said Guilliman.

‘Doing what?’

The explosions went on, gathering strength. It was as if an earthquake were shaking the decks above the Ultramarines. The ship boomed with the sound of terminal collapse.

Guilliman snarled in frustration. ‘They’re blocking us by destroying themselves.’

The corridor beyond the dormitorium confirmed his surmise. Both ends were blocked by compacted iron wreckage. The blasts continued, more muffled now, though the hull still rang like a funeral bell.

‘They are collapsing all the decks between us and the bridge,’ Guilliman said. The World Eaters knew the *Gladiator*’s hours were numbered. The ship was going to die, but it would not be turned from its act of final savagery.

‘There are vital support systems on those decks,’ said Gorod. ‘They are killing themselves.’

‘Does any atrocity surprise you?’ Guilliman asked.

‘It does not.’

‘They don’t need life support for much longer. All they have to do is keep us from taking the bridge. And they have.’ The tactic was both primitive and effective. A mountain of crushed wreckage blocked the way upwards. There was no way for the Ultramarines to blast their way through hundreds of thousands of tonnes of metal before the *Gladiator* hurled virus bombs or cyclonic torpedoes at Diavanos.

‘They cannot disable their weapons if they mean to use them,’ said Gorod.

‘Precisely.’ Guilliman opened a vox-channel to Hierax. ‘Captain, what is your position?’

‘*Five decks below yours, lord primarch. We saw your breach before we made ours.*’

‘We cannot go up. So we go down. Make for the torpedo bays. By the most direct route.’

‘*Understood.*’

Gorod nodded. He grasped the new practical as well. They would melt their way down through the decks to the target.

Marakus of the Invictus squad placed the first krak grenade. Its incandescent heat turned metal to liquid and ate through the deck. Guilliman stared at the detonation without blinking. It could have been the anger of his gaze dissolving the adamantium and iron.

Three decks down, Marakus shouted in triumph. ‘The mark of the Destroyers’ passage,’ he said, pointing to a crater in the deck a dozen yards

ahead.

Guilliman took the lead again, dropping through the hole to a corridor scorched black by the bombardments of the *Cavascor*. It was only a few steps to the next breach, and a deck moaning with the wind of atmosphere escaping though cracks reaching all the way to the wounds in the hull. Guilliman passed the bodies of crew and slaves. There were the corpses of World Eaters too, but no attackers.

'Our passage is strangely uncontested,' said Gorod.

'The World Eaters are concentrating their strength,' said Guilliman. 'All they have to do is maintain control of the weapons until Diavanos is in range. They'll make their stand in the place they know we will attack.'

'Instead of wasting forces defending regions we may never pass through.'

'I doubt their reasons will be that strategic. They just won't want to miss the bloodletting.'

'*Lord primarch*,' Hierax voxed, from only a single deck away, '*torpedo bay in sight.*' A sustained burst of fire obscured his next words. The only word Guilliman could make out was '*entrances*'. That was sufficient. *Theoretical: more than one access to the bay. Practical: use the initial attack of the Destroyers to create a surprise second front.*

'Break them in half, captain,' Guilliman said. 'We are moments away.'

The squad passed the Destroyers' last breach and kept going. The deck thrummed with the crunching rhythm of bolter shells. Guilliman marched forwards, visualising the essential architecture of Imperial battleships, extrapolating variations based on the layout of the halls he had seen during their descent. A hundred yards past the first breach, Guilliman drove the *Hand of Dominion* into the deck. The corridor erupted with an azure flash. Layers of metal vaporised under his blows. He hit again and again. *Do you hear me, you murderous animals?* he thought. *I am judgement coming for you.*

The deck gave way completely and Guilliman dropped through. He rose from a crouch, firing the *Arbitrator* into the surprised World Eaters before him. Armour that had once been bone-white gleamed crimson. Brass spikes studded limbs, helms and pauldrons. Roaring, they charged him with chainaxes coated in dried blood and shredded flesh.

Guilliman drenched them with their own blood, detonating their skulls with his shells.

A few hundred yards to Guilliman's right, Destroyers engaged Destroyers.

The World Eaters fought a version of themselves held back by self-inflicted shackles. The Ultramarines fought an image of what, without honour and discipline, they might have become. Loyalist and traitor attacked each other with a ferocity born of absolute hatred. Hierax's squad hit the World Eaters

with phosphex bombs, then rushed without pause into the inferno they had created. A cloud of white-green death crawled out of the sternward threshold to the torpedo bay. It ate into the armour of legionaries on both sides. It burned ceramite. It burned flesh. Heraldry dissolved, and the quicksilver flame flowed hungrily over blackened, gnawed, unrecognisable corpses.

The legionaries of Ultramar and Nuceria fought and killed each other in the midst of the spreading hell. Green flames licking down his pauldrons, Hierax smashed the edge of his chainsword into a World Eater's gorget. The blade ground through, finding a weak point in the armour. The traitor struck at the captain's helm with his chainaxe. Hierax roared with pain, but did not waver even as the helmet began to crack. He leaned into the sword. '*You will bleed for Ultramar!*' he shouted, hunger for vengeance reverberating from his vox-casters. Gristle and bone parted. The World Eater's head fell backwards, arterial blood spraying wide into the burning green.

Guilliman and the Invictus Guard stormed into the torpedo bay, and into a maw of bestial fury. The Red Butchers howled in mindless wrath. Madness contained within Terminator armour, they charged without hesitation into the hail of bolter shells. The storm from the *Arbitrator* shattered their front ranks, exploding through armour and bone. Beyond feral, blind to everything but the need to kill, the Red Butchers charged over their dead and slammed into the tight formation of the Invictus Guard.

Guilliman's jaw was tight with rage as he waded into a maelstrom of pure destruction. These *things* had once been sworn to the task of spreading and preserving the Emperor's dream. They had become every worst instinct the dream had come to purge. *You were always going to fall, Angron,* Guilliman thought, and with a surge of bitter contempt he slammed the *Hand of Dominion* into the wretches. They were things without thought, flesh-machines of empty fury.

There was nothing these warriors could do to stop him. But they might, in their berserk charge, slow him down and keep him from his target. Beyond the mass of World Eaters, past fallen gantries and slicks of burning promethium, many of the launch tubes lay open, their ordnance already fired. The largest of the vault-like doors was closed, its approach defended by a Centurion and a Dreadnought. So sealed, it meant the cyclonic torpedo had yet to be fired.

Guilliman drove the *Hand of Dominion* through the chest-plate of a Red Butcher. He hurled himself through the Terminators like a battering ram.

'Drakus!' the Centurion shouted, his voice amplified by his vox-caster. It was hoarse and rattled wetly, as if its owner were swallowing blood. 'I rejoice to see you burn today!'

The Centurion commanding the World Eaters stood next to the torpedo door, flanked by a Dreadnought.

‘Deranax,’ Gorod voxed to Guilliman. He did not respond to the World Eater’s taunt. ‘His belief in the Great Crusade was once very strong.’

‘Then his sin is all the greater,’ Guilliman snarled. *He will atone*, he thought. *He will atone until he is ash.*

The leaping, burning streams of phosphex from the other entrance were devouring the enemy. The Red Butchers were falling before the disciplined fire of the Invictus Guard. The tide of battle was against the World Eaters. But Deranax stood in triumph. Guilliman realised the torpedo was moments from firing. Diavanos was in range.

Guilliman’s leap carried him over the heads of a cluster of Red Butchers. He came down with the *Hand of Dominion* at full charge. The force of his blow sent out a shock wave so destructive it was as a meteor slamming into the enemy. Terminator armour ruptured. Bodies burst into fragments. Shrapnel of bone and ceramite exploded. Guilliman ran through a storm of blood, sending a barrage of combi-bolter shells ahead of him, carving a path through the World Eaters.

The Contemptor Dreadnought thundered towards him, its heavy bolter roaring, its power claw reaching out. Deranax laughed, then turned to the controls next to the hydraulic arms controlling the vault door.

Guilliman moved too fast for the Dreadnought to track. He closed with the monster, clenching the *Hand of Dominion*, and fired a burst of shells into the helm. The Dreadnought shouted in incoherent wrath. The *Hand of Dominion* smashed through the Contemptor’s power claw, then hammered the sarcophagus.

The Dreadnought staggered. Its heavy bolter arm flailed in an attempt to get Guilliman in the line of fire. The primarch struck its chest-plate again. The sarcophagus was centuries old. It could withstand a direct hit from an artillery shell. The *Hand of Dominion* was much older, and was of a far different order of power. And it was wielded by a primarch. The sarcophagus collapsed beneath Guilliman’s blow. He drove the *Hand of Dominion* through the layers of armour shielding, and into the soft, broken thing that was all that remained of the interred legionary’s body.

The Dreadnought’s roaring cut off at once.

The hydraulic arms pulled the vault door open, revealing the torpedo. Deranax held a detonator. ‘Aim at a world and kill a primarch,’ he growled with bloodlust and triumph. There were demolition charges on the casing of the torpedo.

The Centurion had used Diavanos as a lure, Guilliman realised. Deranax had

waited until Guilliman was before him, and now he was going to trigger the cyclonic torpedo's detonation inside the *Gladiator*. Instead of destroying a planet as his final act of brutality, he would take the Emperor's Avenging Son with him into his funeral pyre.

Guilliman fired. The shells struck Deranax's wrist before he could pull the detonator's trigger. They destroyed the World Eater's hand but spared the detonator. It flew behind him and howling he lunged for the device. Guilliman seized Deranax with the power gauntlet and smashed him against a wall. He squeezed, channelling the *Hand'*s power into a crushing grip. The Centurion's limbs and his immolating design came apart. Guilliman jammed the muzzle of the *Aribtrator* against Deranax's helmet.

The Centurion snarled, dying but undefeated. 'It all burns in the end,' he choked out.

Guilliman pulled the trigger.

As he turned from the corpse, Iasus voxed from the *Cavascor*. '*Lord primarch, have you taken the bridge?*'

'It's unreachable. We have the torpedo bay.' The Red Butchers and the Destroyers were still fighting. They would until the end, but the end was coming fast.

After a moment, Iasus said, '*Lord Guilliman, I must urge your immediate withdrawal. The* Gladiator *is on a collision course with Diavanos. Thunderhawks are closing with your position. You must breach and evacuate at once.*'

Through the Thunderhawk's viewing block, Guilliman saw the fiery descent of the *Gladiator*. He saw the dark blade of the battleship plunge through the atmosphere of Diavanos. He saw it flare red with heat.

He saw the blinding fireball of impact and the plasma detonation. No cyclonic torpedo cracked the planet open, but the *Gladiator* hit with the force of an asteroid. A bloom of fire, blinding white, hundreds of kilometres in diameter, lit up the clouds. The atmosphere convulsed, transforming into a furious cauldron, storm upon storm spreading across the world of gossamer towers. A terminal wind swept the continents, scouring Diavanos of its crystalline promise, putting an end to dreams.

In the strategium of the *Ultimus Mundi*, Guilliman gazed at the deep augur picts of Diavanos. *This is what we have saved*, he thought. *This is all we have saved of this world*. The *Gladiator* had made planetfall fifty miles from Ecstasia. The blast had razed the capital city. The delicate traceries of the architecture had vanished. Broken angles of glass and iron jutted through the clouds of ash and dust. There was nothing but grey now, grey forever under a

sky of dark lead. Ashes fell, as they would for centuries to come.

‘Some of the industries in the southern land mass are still viable,’ Gorod said. ‘The population has not slipped below the critical mass. Diavanos will survive.’

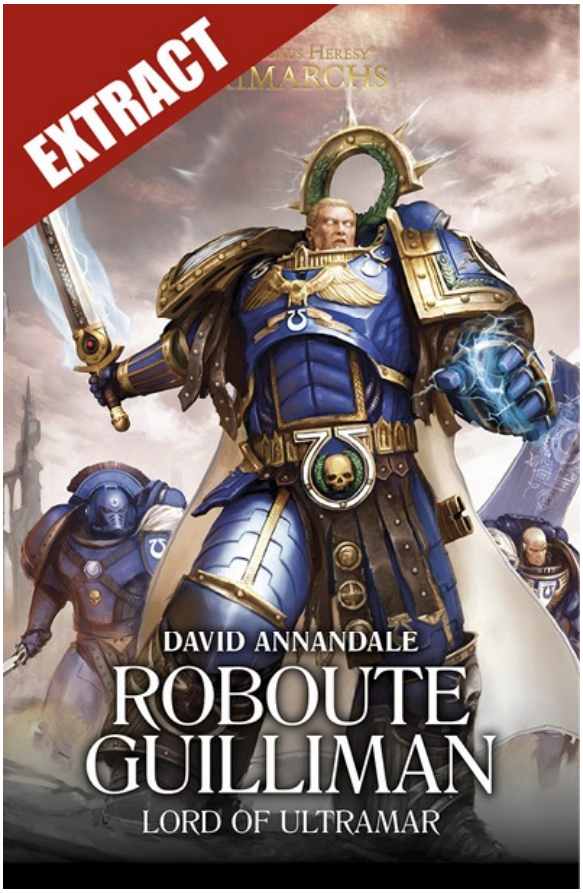
‘Survive,’ Guilliman repeated. The word was as dry as the ash in the air. ‘Survival is not enough, Drakus. Look at what has been lost. Millennia of culture has been extinguished. Diavanos was a beacon through the Age of Strife. Where is its light now? Mere survival means decline. This will become a place of darkness and ignorance, unless we can kindle a new fire. Only the Imperium can do that. We do not fight just for the survival of the Imperium. We fight for the preservation of a dream.’

There was no atonement to be found here. There was only determination, and a vow. ‘The Imperium will never be reduced to this darkness,’ he told Gorod. ‘It will be forever worthy of my father. Forever. I will hold it in the light. And if I have to fight forever, I will.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade* and *Castellan*, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *Neferata: Mortarch of Blood*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

An extract from *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar*.



One empire came to Thoas to crush another.

The empire of order and light arrived in the form of an armada. If the eyes of the other empire had turned to the void, perhaps they would have witnessed the final approach. They would have seen a swarm of blades. Each blade was a ship thousands of yards long. The greatest of them spanned fifteen miles from stem to stern. It was both sword and mountain chain. From the surface of Thoas, it would have appeared as an elongated star, moving with unalterable purpose with its smaller brothers. A constellation of war filling the night sky.

But in the second empire, there were no eyes to look upwards, or none to understand what they saw. This was not an empire worthy of the name. Yet it had held a dozen systems. One by one, they had been ripped from its grasping claws. Now the empire unworthy of the name was reduced to its core. Its seat of strength. Its source of contagion.

It did not see its doom arrive. If it saw, it did not understand. If it understood, it did not care. Such was its nature. That reason alone was enough to warrant its extermination.

Remark 73.44.liv: The visibility of the leader at significant moments of a campaign carries its own signification. It reinforces his interest not just in the goal, but in those sworn to carry it out. The leader who lacks these interests invites and deserves defeat.

Roboute Guilliman stood at the lectern of the bridge of the *Macragge's Honour*. Below him, in a tiered space the size of an arena, the level of activity had risen in urgency, but proceeded with no loss of calm. Officers performed their tasks with the same efficiency as the servitors. The bridge hummed with the sound of human machinery, gears meshing smoothly, readying for war.

Guilliman had been at his station five hours already, ever since the translation to the system. He was here to witness and to be witnessed, as was proper. *Addendum to 73.44.liv*, he thought. *Interest cannot be feigned.* He would insert the correction to the manuscript later.

He had watched Thoas grow large in the forward bridge windows. He had seen its details resolve themselves as the layers of augur scans built up the composite picture of the target. The forward elements of the fleet were now at low anchor, awaiting his command for the next stage of reconnaissance.

‘Another message from Captain Sirras,’ said Marius Gage.

‘Reconfirming that his Scouts are ready?’ Guilliman said.

The Chapter Master Primus of the XIII Legion grinned. ‘That would be correct.’

‘He’s contacting you directly now?’

‘We were together on Septus Twelve in the Osiris Cluster.’

‘In the hive?’

‘Yes,’ said Gage. ‘We both made it to the surface in time to see the flares of the fleet burning when the Psybrid ships sprung the ambush.’

‘So he presumes this gives him leave to bypass the chain of command?’ Guilliman asked.

‘The Twenty-second is still without a Chapter Master,’ Gage reminded him.

‘I haven’t forgotten.’ The orks of the Thoas Empire had taken Machon’s head in the final stages of the campaign to purge them from the Aletho system. ‘There will be a new Chapter Master before we land on Thoas. The current lack does not justify Sirras trying to make an improvisational end run around my timing decisions.’

‘An official reprimand?’ Gage asked.

‘No. But inform him that if he contacts you again, the next voice he hears will be mine.’

The old warrior nodded. His features were worn by his centuries of campaigning, and had been weathered into wry, intelligent cragginess. He walked a few steps away to vox the captain of the 223rd Company.

‘Wait,’ Guilliman said. *Remark 73.42.xv: It is the duty of the soldier to accept an order without a rationale being provided, but the absence of a rationale should never be the default condition.* ‘Let him know the scans are still being collated. He isn’t waiting on a whim. He’s waiting for a worthwhile target.’

In the bridge window, another layer of topographical detail was added. The image of Thoas sharpened. Coastlines changed from fractal abstractions to specific geological characterisations. The world was becoming a real place. It was tidally locked by its blue star. Half of the planet burned forever while the other half froze. The Ultramarines fleet was anchored over the region of the terminator, where twilight and dawn would never end.

Guilliman examined the sphere. He frowned. ‘Magnification of the northern tropic,’ he said.

The image grew.

‘Increase magnification.’

There.

A cordillera ran along a north-to-south-west diagonal down the western region of the largest continental mass. To the east, the land was wrinkled with mountains, canyons and plateaus for close to five hundred miles. To the west was a vast plain that reached almost to the coast before it ran up against a narrower, lower chain of peaks. In the western flank of the cordillera, Guilliman saw lines that were too regular. There were structures there, almost as big as the mountains in which they nestled.

‘Biomass readings in this sector?’ Guilliman asked.

‘A very high concentration of orks, lord,’ the Augur Master reported.

Given the inviting geography of the plain and the easier slopes of the foothills, that was to be expected. ‘Compared to the other principal land masses?’

‘Higher,’ the officer confirmed.

‘Are you seeing this?’ Guilliman said to Gage.

‘I am. Are those human?’

‘Records about Thoas are fragmentary in the extreme. To date I have found only two references to any form of human colonisation.’

‘Those are big,’ said Gage. ‘This was more than a colony.’

Guilliman nodded. ‘It was a civilisation.’ The prospect was pleasing. If there had been human colonies in the other systems reclaimed from the orks, all traces had long since vanished. That such signs would appear on this world, where the final battle against the greenskin empire would take place, was a gift of inestimable value. *If* the ruins were human. ‘Tell Sirras we have a target for him.’

‘Evido Banzor has Scouts ready for a low orbit drop too,’ Gage said. ‘Part of the 166th, under Captain Iasus.’

‘Good. Send them both down. I want their eyes on the ork dispositions with particular respect to those structures. The Thoas campaign begins there.’

‘“*When presented with a choice of beginnings, choose the one with meaning*,”’ Gage quoted.

‘Remark 45.xxx,’ said Guilliman. ‘Flatterer.’

‘Merely a manifest truth,’ Gage said, his eyes on the traces of immense ruins.

‘Our captain honours us with his presence,’ said Meton. His voice was a whisper, inaudible except over the vox. The orks were a long way beyond earshot. The visible ones, at least. Meton was observing proper discipline,

taking no chances as the squads made their way up towards the ridge.

‘Theoretical – our captain is merely eager to get his hands dirty with greenskin gore,’ Sergeant Phocion said.

‘Practical – your captain would like you both to shut up,’ said Eleon Iasus. They were both partly correct. There was no compelling necessity for him to have left the *Praetorian Trust* to accompany the Scouts on their reconnaissance. There was no dereliction of duty either, though. As a sergeant, he had held Phocion’s position for decades. And he had cleared his venture with Chapter Master Banzor. Yes, he wanted the feel of Thoas’ surface under his boots as soon as possible. There was more, though. *Theoretical: there is no such thing as superfluous advance knowledge of the battlefield. Practical: where possible, add first-hand experience to intelligence gathered from a distance.* He wanted to see the ruins. He wanted to know what would be the epicentre of the campaign.

The Scouts of the 166th prowled along the western spines of the cordillera to the south of the ruins. They maintained vox contact with the squads from the 223rd coming in from the north. Both had come down by Thunderhawk, deposited on ledges a short way down the east-facing slopes. There had been no contact with the enemy. There was nothing to attract the orks here. The mountainsides were sheer, the valleys narrow and barren. There was nothing to fight over, and no room to fight either. The tectonic upheavals in this region had been so violent, so sudden, and involved so much compression that the chains of the cordillera were as narrow and sharp as rows of fangs.

Footing was treacherous. Iasus and the Scouts climbed, working their way up the nearly vertical mountain face. The sharp folds of the granite caught and held shadows. Both of Thoas’ moons were full, but the mountains had draped themselves in a dark more profound than night. Even with his enhanced sight and the night-vision lenses, Iasus was blind when his climb took him deep into the vertical crevasses. He climbed by feel, reaching up, digging his gauntleted fingers into the cracks, holding onto jagged protrusions with certainty they would not crumble beneath his weight. Long before he reached the top, the drop below, a fall from dark into dark, would have been far enough to kill him.

He was glad he had come. Each foot of the climb instilled a greater sense of Thoas in him. The theoretical knowledge transforming into the practical experience.

The ridge was as sharp and narrow as he had imagined it would be. He stood on the edge of an immense, rocky sawblade. It was difficult to stand.

‘Theoretical,’ said Meton. ‘If we drive the orks into these mountains, we’ll smash them.’

‘We’ll smash them regardless,’ Iasus said. The Scout was correct, though – an army that retreated into the mountains would be devoured by their teeth. And if by some chance the orks survived, if they went any further east, they would reach sunrise, and be cremated.

Iasus looked down. The orks were all to the west, the clans gathered in their hundreds of thousands on the plain near the base of the foothills and on the gradual slopes of the start of the mountains.

And they infested the ruins.

Phocion’s squad had advanced to a point several thousand yards from the nearest structure. The edges of the ork horde were directly below. The growls and snarls of the brutes rose to the heights like the roar of a violent surf. There were orks on the plain too, but the bulk of their numbers were sticking to the high ground. There was no reason to think these greenskins were intelligent enough to understand what force was coming for them, but they were readying for battle. As the Ultramarines had taken apart their empire, they had left no survivors in their wake. The beasts lacked anything but the most rudimentary technology. They had nothing resembling interplanetary vox communication. Yet somehow, they knew. Some collective instinct of the species told the greenskins to prepare.

Iasus turned his attention from the orks to the ruins. He raised magnoculars to his helm lenses. The structures snapped into clearer focus. They were badly damaged. The upper levels had collapsed. Apertures gaped, open to the winds and storms of Thoas. The roofs were gone from the buildings he could see. They were still colossal. They were constructed of huge blocks carved from the mountains. Iasus estimated that each brick was larger than a Thunderhawk. He saw pillars as high as Warhound Titans. They too were monoliths.

So much had fallen that the original shape of the ruins was difficult to discern. What Iasus could make out looked like terraced pyramids, each the size of a small city. The terraces were narrow in proportion to the levels’ soaring height. The effect was less of broad, squat structures, more of towering massiveness. The architecture was aggressive and brutal even in its decay. But it was not alien. Colossal as the scale was, the shape of the vaulted apertures was recognisable. There were smaller doorways in the walls, openings where orks had to bend down to pass through.

‘The greenskins did a thorough job,’ Phocion said.

‘So will we.’ Iasus lowered the magnoculars. ‘This was a human world once. It will be again.’

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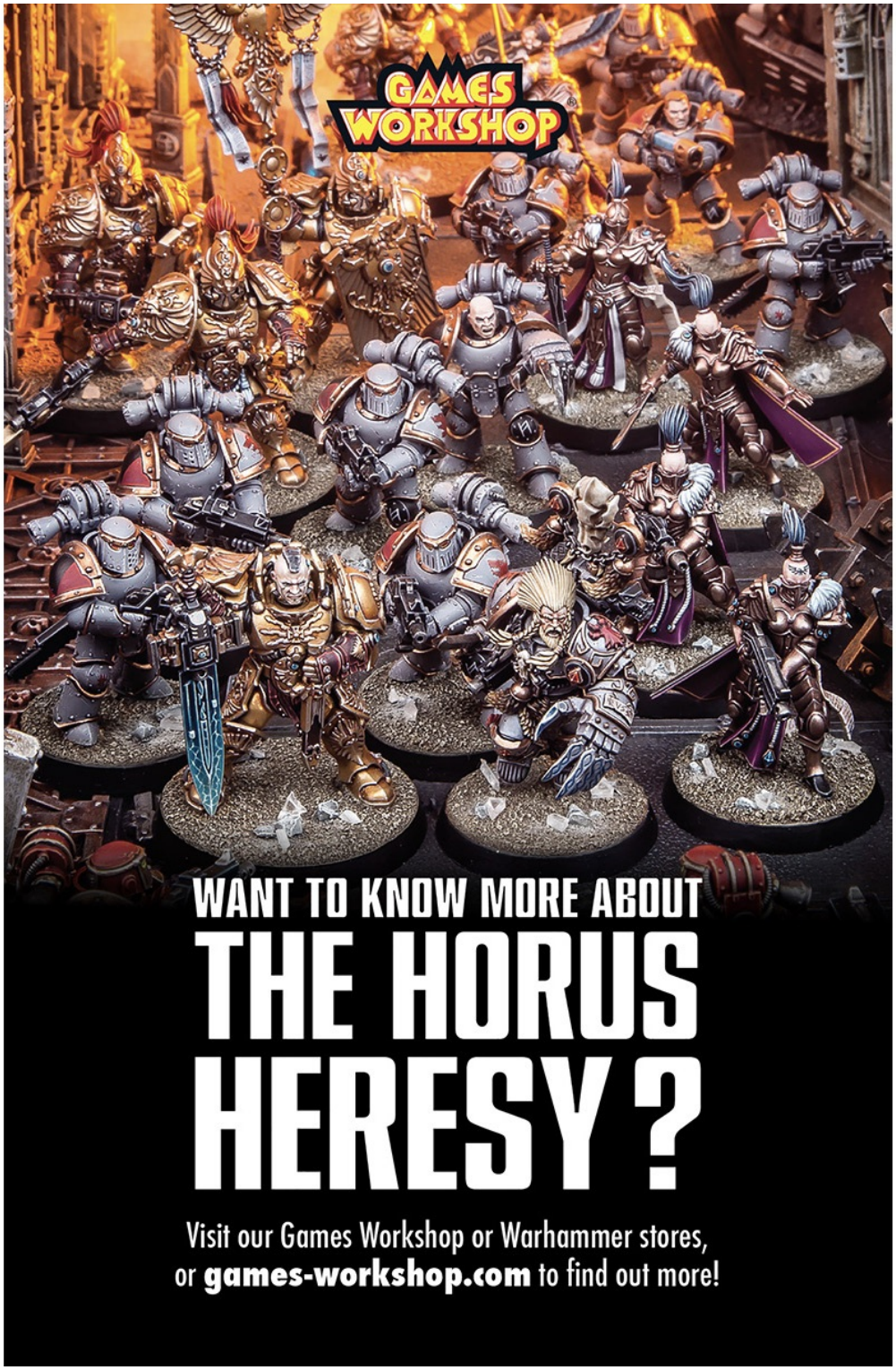
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